

# Living Alone in Australia

## Trends in Sole Living and Characteristics of Those Who Live Alone

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### Introduction

Since the 1960s we have experienced major changes in the way people live and the way in which they build their families and households. Adults are marrying and having children later than in the past, if they do these things at all; families have become less stable, smaller and more diverse. A great deal is now known about these changes<sup>1</sup> but a parallel change, the steady rise in one person households, is barely understood.

In 2006 almost two million adults were living alone in Australia. This number, which represents 13 per cent of *individuals* aged 20 and older, is steadily rising; since 1971 lone person *households*<sup>2</sup> have almost doubled from 14 per cent of all Australian *households* in 1971 to 27 per cent in 2006. By any measure, those who live alone represent a significant proportion of the population and the growth in this form of living invites us to ask what kinds of people are living alone and whether the increase in living alone is more marked among some sectors of the population than others. By examining the types of people who live alone, what are we able to conclude about this rise in living alone?

To begin to make sense of the accelerating phenomenon of living alone we must first develop a picture of the types of people who live alone. It is only by understanding who lives alone and the groups among whom living alone is growing that we can begin to understand what might lie behind this trend – a trend that is seen in all developed countries.

We will focus on a limited set of factors. First, we explore the *age, gender and marital status* profile of those who live alone. A traditional image of solo living is that of the elderly widow. But is this accurate? Are those that live alone mainly elderly? Is the growth in living alone due to the ageing of the population or is it driven by an increase in the number of young people living alone, by delaying marriage and childbearing? While widowhood is one reason why people will live alone, other changes to marriage patterns could also be responsible. Not only are young people delaying marriage, far more people are separating and divorcing and thus 'at risk' of living alone. Is it true that solo living is more common among women, as the image of the elderly widow would suggest? How often do men live alone? While relatively few elderly men live alone there are good reasons to expect that living alone will be more common among younger and middle aged men. Is the growth in living alone being driven by an increase in younger women living alone as they become economically more independent and where cultural changes are more supportive of younger women living an independent life?

The second set of factors we explore focus on aspects of *social advantage and disadvantage*. Here we ask whether living alone is more common among those who are relatively socially advantaged or among those who are more marginalised. One popular image of those who live alone is that solo living reflects loss. It is imagined to be the living arrangement of loners and those who cannot form friendships or form and keep families. But living alone, where living costs cannot be shared and economies of scale are not available, is also a relatively expensive way of living. So we might expect that living alone will be more common among the affluent and the successful who can afford this lifestyle. Rather than being a living arrangement of the loner who cannot manage to find others to live with, it might be the living arrangement chosen by those

who are seeking independence and have the personal and financial resources to enable them to achieve this.

A better picture of the kinds of people who live alone and where the growth in living alone is taking place will provide insights into the factors that are behind this profound social change.

## **Data**

Our analysis relies on data from the 2006 Australian Census and from two earlier censuses in 1986 and 1996. The 2006 Census provides the most recent snapshot of living alone while the two earlier censuses allow us to track changes in patterns of living alone over a 20-year period. It was not feasible to go back to earlier years because the information from these earlier years was not directly comparable with the Census information from 1986 onwards.

The Census provides the best source of information available to develop a fine grained profile of living alone and of changes in this profile. Most surveys simply do not include sufficient numbers of people living alone to undertake the detailed analysis possible with the Census. For example, the Census data allow us to look at rates of living alone in quite specific sub groups (eg, females aged 30–40 in professional occupations), while most surveys would have insufficient cases to allow meaningful analysis of such specific sub groups. But it is precisely this type of fine grained analysis that can be critical to discovering the factors behind the trends.

An equally important strength of the Census is that it can demonstrate trends over time. These two features of the Census – fine grained analysis and trends – provide the basis for explanations of change. Not only can we identify the groups where living alone is most common we can also see the specific groups where it is becoming less or more common. Together this information provides strong clues that help shape empirically strong explanations.

While the Census provides the best information available about living alone it has its obvious limitations. One of these is that it only provides point-in-time estimates of the percentage of the population that live alone on Census night. It cannot provide information regarding the duration for which people live alone. Nor can it provide any estimates of the percentage of people who at some point in their life live alone. In this respect, these point-in-time estimates from the Census will underestimate the number of individuals who *ever* live alone. Changing rates of living alone can therefore only be measured at the aggregate level (ie, differences in the percent of the population living alone at two different time points) and not at the individual level (ie, the number of people who either begin or stop living alone).

Care must be exercised when reading statistics about living alone. Unless we are clear about exactly what the statistics are, it is easy to become confused when reading and comparing living alone statistics. There are five traps in particular to be on the lookout for.

First, it is important to distinguish between statistics that report the percentage of lone person *households* and the percentage of *individuals* that live alone. The percentage of lone person households will always be greater than the percentage of individuals living alone. Typical of the mistake that can be made by those not alert to the distinction is the statement by Frank Furedi that:

...about 40 per cent of Swedes now live alone. The shift towards solo living is most pronounced in the big urban centres of the West – with over 50 percent of households in Munich, Frankfurt and Paris containing just one person, while in London nearly four in 10 people live on their own.<sup>3</sup>

The reality is that 40 per cent (actually it is 46 per cent) of *Swedish households* are lone person households – not 40 percent of *individuals*. The difference is that when households are counted, a sole person household counts the same as a multi-person household which contains many people. But when individuals are counted, it does not. As we saw at the beginning of this paper, 27 percent of Australian households had one person in 2006, but only 13 percent of adults lived alone. Similarly, while Furedi is correct in stating that that 50 per cent of households in central Paris are lone person households, he is incorrect in stating that four in ten Londoners live alone. Rather, four in 10 *households* in London are lone person households.<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise stated, this essay focuses on *individuals* who live alone.

Second, we must know the *population base* on which percentages are based. Normally, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data describing the percentage of individuals who live alone refer to the percentage of *all people aged 15 or over*. It seems misleading to include young people aged 15 to 19 in the calculations as there is relatively little chance that they will live alone.<sup>5</sup> The effect of including 15–19 year olds is to underestimate the rate at which adults live alone. Many statistics reported internationally do not specify whether the base is all individuals, all individuals aged 15 or over, all adults or some other base. Care therefore needs to be taken when comparing these percentages across nations. In this essay we use a base of people aged 20 or older.

Third, we need to be clear about which part of the adult population is included in the calculations. Some reports calculate percentages based only on individuals living in *private dwellings* while others include people in non-private dwellings.<sup>6</sup> To restrict the population base only to those in private dwellings inflates the percentage of people who live alone. While all people living alone live in a private dwelling, calculations of, say, the number of people aged 70 and older who live alone will include people in non-private dwellings in the denominator for calculating the percentage. In this essay percentages are based on all adults, regardless of whether they live in private or non-private dwellings.

Fourth, it is not always clear what dwellings are included in the definition of households. Some data include people living in caravan parks, cabins, houseboats and above shops while others do not. This can account for differences of one or two percentage points in estimates. In this essay these types of dwellings are included as private dwellings.

Finally, the base on which percentages are calculated must be clear. When discussing people living alone, percentages can quite properly be presented as either:

1. The percentage of a *given group* that live alone (eg, what percentage of people in their eighties live alone? Correct answer is 36.7 per cent), or;
2. *Of those who live alone*, what percentage has a particular characteristic (eg, what percentage of those who live alone are in their eighties? Correct answer is 12.1 per cent).

One further note of caution is required when exploring statistics that describe the social and demographic factors associated with living alone. Any assumptions of causality

based on these correlational data are speculative. In the analysis that follows, any causal relationships that might be assumed relate to the effect of social and demographic characteristics on living alone rather than on the way in which living alone might affect a person's social characteristics or behaviour.

### International comparisons

International comparisons of living alone rates are limited here to the percentage of *households* that are lone person households. Unfortunately, valid international comparisons of the percentage of individuals living alone are hampered by the failure of most published data either to provide such figures or to specify the base on which these percentages are calculated (see above). The data reported in Table 1 are mainly based on national census data or major official national data collections. Trend data are provided where publicly available.

**Table 1: Per cent lone person households, various countries  
(selected years)**

Countries	1946 <sup>a</sup>	1980	1990	2001	2006
Per cent					
<b>Scandinavia</b>					
Denmark	14.0 <sup>i</sup>	29.1	34.0	37.1	38.4
Finland	18.0 <sup>i</sup>	27.1	31.7	37.9	40.1
Sweden		32.8	44.1	46.2	46.3 <sup>l</sup>
Norway		27.9	34.3	37.7 <sup>j</sup>	38.9
<b>Western Europe</b>					
Netherlands	9.0 <sup>i</sup>	22.1	29.9	34.0	35.0
Switzerland	9	29.0	32.4	36.0 <sup>j</sup>	
Austria	18 <sup>i</sup>	26.1	27.9	31.4	34.7
Belgium	16	23.2	28.4	31.6	33.2
France	19		26.1	31.2	30.1 <sup>l</sup>
Germany	12	30.2	35.0	36.6	38.8
<b>Southern European</b>					
Italy	10.0 <sup>i</sup>			24.7	26.2
Spain		7.8	9.9	11.3 <sup>j</sup>	14.2 <sup>l</sup>
<b>English Speaking</b>					
<b>Australia</b>	8.1 <sup>f</sup>	15.7 <sup>g</sup>	19.3 <sup>h</sup>	24.0	27.0
New Zealand					22.6
Ireland	11.0	17.1	20.2	22.1	22.4
Canada		16.8 <sup>g</sup>		25.7	26.8
UK	9-11 <sup>i</sup>	22.0	27.0	29.0	28.7
US	9.3 <sup>i</sup>	22.6	24.6	25.8 <sup>j</sup>	26.1

Countries	1946 <sup>a</sup>	1980	1990	2001	2006
<b>Eastern Europe</b>					
Hungary		19.6	24.2	26.2	29.1 <sup>l</sup>
Czech Republic		24.2	26.9	29.9	25.0
Poland		17.4	18.3	21.6 <sup>j</sup>	
Croatia		16.0	17.8	20.8	
Malta					18.9 <sup>l</sup>
Slovenia		17.1	18.0		
Turkey				4.0 <sup>k</sup>	3.1
<b>Developed Asian Economies</b>					
Japan					29.4
Hong Kong <sup>e</sup>				15.6	16.5
China				8.3 <sup>j</sup>	
Singapore				8.2 <sup>j</sup>	10 <sup>l</sup>
<b>Central and Southern America</b>					
Brazil <sup>c</sup>				8.3	
Mexico <sup>c</sup>				1.5	
Chile <sup>c</sup>				2.2	
Colombia <sup>c</sup>				1.2	
Peru <sup>c</sup>				1.0	
Argentina <sup>c</sup>				6.7	

Sources: UNECE

[http://w3.unece.org/pxweb/Dialog/varval.asp?ma=08\\_GEFHPrivHouse\\_r&ti=Private+households+by+Household+Type%2C+Measurement%2C+Country+and+Year&path=../DATABASE/Stat/30-GE/02-Families\\_households/&lang=1](http://w3.unece.org/pxweb/Dialog/varval.asp?ma=08_GEFHPrivHouse_r&ti=Private+households+by+Household+Type%2C+Measurement%2C+Country+and+Year&path=../DATABASE/Stat/30-GE/02-Families_households/&lang=1) (retrieved 3/3/2009)

For Canada (retrieved 3/3/2009).

<http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/products/highlight/PrivateHouseholds/Page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo=PR&View=1a&Table=1&StartRec=1&Sort=2&B1=Counts> (retrieved 3/3/2009)

<http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/data/highlights/households/pages/Page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo=PR&Code=01&Table=2&Data=Count&Age=1&StartRec=1&Sort=2&Display=Page> (retrieved 3/3/2009)

<sup>a</sup> Wall, R. (1988); <sup>b</sup> Harrison, B. (1981). <sup>c</sup>

<http://www.zonalatina.com/Zldata226.htm> (r retrieved 3/3/2009); d. Nishiok, Suzuki et al. (2000); <sup>e</sup>

[http://www.bycensus2006.gov.hk/data/data3/statistical\\_tables/index.htm#D1](http://www.bycensus2006.gov.hk/data/data3/statistical_tables/index.htm#D1) (retrieved 3/3/2009) <sup>f</sup>1947 <sup>g</sup>1976 <sup>h</sup>1991 <sup>i</sup>1950 <sup>j</sup>2000 <sup>k</sup>2002 <sup>l</sup>2005

The first observation from Table 1 is that rates of living alone vary considerably by country and region and, among other things, reflect the relative level of affluence in

those countries. However, many poorer nations either do not collect or do not report household-size data.

In general, rates of lone person households are much higher in the more developed countries. Rates are highest in the Scandinavian countries, ranging between 38 to 46 per cent of households in 2006. In each Scandinavian country for which time-series data are available, the rates of lone person households have continued to increase over time.

Western European countries have the next highest level of lone person households, ranging between 2006 levels of 30 per cent (France) and 39 per cent (Germany).

English speaking countries have a lower level of lone person households than the economically developed Western European countries. In 2006, in the English speaking countries, between 22 per cent (Ireland) through to 29 per cent (United Kingdom) of households were lone person households. Within the English speaking countries and in contrast with Western European countries and Scandinavia, Australia, in which 27 per cent of households are lone person households, has a relatively modest level of living alone.

Eastern European rates vary somewhat ranging from 29 percent in Hungary to less than 20 per cent in Malta. Turkey has a very low 3.1 per cent of lone person households. The low 2006 rates in Turkey are similar to the very low 2001 rates of living alone in the less affluent Central American countries and in Latin America, where the rates range between one and eight per cent.

Rates of living alone in 2006 in affluent Asian countries for which data were available provides a rather mixed picture. Japan has a relatively high level of lone person households (29 per cent) while Singapore and Hong Kong have relatively low levels (10 per cent and 17 per cent respectively). While less affluent, 8.3 per cent of households in China consisted of just one person in 2001. All three affluent Asian countries have high housing costs and high population densities. It is entirely plausible that the low rates of living alone in Singapore and Hong Kong are related to population and housing pressures but it is not clear why the same factors have not led to low levels in Japan.

Where time-series data are available the consistent picture is that levels of lone person households are increasing over time, though the rate of increase may be slowing in more recent times. However more data and closer analysis is required to test this observation in more detail.

### **The changing demographics of living alone**

Like most other countries, Australia has experienced significant growth in the rate of living alone. At the household level, the Australian rate has increased from 13.6 per cent in 1971 to 27 per cent in 2006. At the individual level, over just 20 years from 1986 to 2006, the number of adults<sup>7</sup> living alone increased by three quarters of a million – almost a doubling of the number of adults living alone. As a proportion of the population, the percentage of adults living alone increased from 9.3 per cent to 13 per cent – a 40 per cent increase.<sup>8</sup>

While the propensity to live alone continues to increase, the rate of increase appears to be slowing. In the 10 years from 1986 to 1996 the proportion of people living alone increased by 28 per cent, while in the following decade from 1996 to 2006 the proportion living alone increased by just nine per cent.

**Table 2: Living alone percent and numbers 1986-2006  
(of 20+ population)**

	<b>Per cent living alone</b>	<b>Number living alone</b>
<b>1986</b>	9.3	950,558
<b>1996</b>	11.9	1,457,854
<b>2006</b>	13.0	1,725,865

Source: Customised data cubes of 1986, 1996 and 2006 Census of Population and Housing

Note: Population base includes all people aged 20 and over including those in non private dwellings

The slowing rate of growth in living alone has occurred at the same time as adult population growth has slowed. From 1986–96 when living alone increased by 28 per cent, the adult population increased by 20 per cent. In the subsequent decade when the percentage living alone increased by just nine per cent, the population aged 20 and over increased by just six per cent.

While a substantial reason for the growth in the *number* of people living alone is population growth, it is also clear that living alone is increasing at a faster rate than population growth. It is also clear that the slowing in the rate of living alone seems to match the slowing in population growth over the same period.

### Changing age structure and living alone

Before we can understand what the increasing incidence of living alone might signify, we need to refine our understanding of the age groups among which living alone increased. If it was mainly among the elderly population then the explanation for the increase in living alone would be different from that among the young or the middle aged.

In the 20 years from 1986–2006, the age profile of the population that lived alone changed substantially. Table 3 (overleaf) reports the percentage of the living alone population from each age group for 1986, 1996 and 2006. It shows that over this period, young people in their twenties and older people in their sixties and seventies became relatively smaller groups of the living alone population, while those in their forties and fifties, and those eighty years and older, became relatively larger parts of the group.

Changes in the age structure of the living alone population is linked to, but not determined by, changes in the age structure of the population. But the age structure of the living alone population will also be affected by the changing *rate* at which people in particular age groups live alone. Age groups differ sharply in the probability that a person in that age group will live alone. The older a person is, the greater the chance that they will live alone. The age differences in living alone rates are easy to see in Table 4, which reports the percentage of each age group that lived alone in 1986, 1996 and 2006. In 2006 just seven per cent of those in their twenties lived alone while almost 36 per cent of those aged over 80 lived alone.

**Table 3: Percentage increase in living alone by age group compared to population increase**

Age	Per cent of living alone population				All 20+ population
	1986	1996	2006	Percentage point change 1986-2006	Percentage point change in proportion of the age group in the whole 20+ population
<b>20-29</b>	14.4	13.8	9.5	-4.9	-6.4
<b>30-39</b>	13.1	14.7	13.2	0.1	-3.2
<b>40-49</b>	9.3	13.6	14.3	5.0	3.5
<b>50-59</b>	12.5	12.8	17.2	4.7	4.0
<b>60-69</b>	20.3	15.4	15.9	-4.4	-0.4
<b>70-79</b>	21.4	18.7	16.1	-5.3	0.4
<b>80+</b>	9.0	11.1	13.8	4.8	2.1
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100		

Source: Customised data cubes of 1986,1996 and 2006 Census of Population and Housing

Two other salient patterns are clear in Table 4. First, in every age group, except those in their seventies, there has been an increase from 1986 to 2006 in the rate at which people live alone.

Second, the rate at which living alone has increased from 1986 to 2006 is quite different for each age group. Taken overall, the rate of adults living alone in 1986 was 9.3 per 100 (9.3 per cent). By 2006 this rate had increased to 13 per cent – a 40 per cent increase. But the rate of growth was much lower than this in some age groups, and higher in others. The lowest growth was among those in their seventies followed by those in their sixties and then by the youngest (twenties) and the oldest age groups. The low rate of increase in living alone among those in their sixties and seventies is no doubt due to increased longevity and a reduction of the chances of living alone due to widowhood.

The sharpest increase in the probability of living alone was among people aged 30–59. It is also worth noting that the largest increase in the rate of living alone in these age groups (and the other age groups for that matter) occurred between 1986 and 1996. Why should the rate of increase of living alone in this age group be so much greater than among other age groups? We will return to this matter shortly but first we should note the way in which men living alone have very different age profiles to women who live alone.

**Table 4: Per cent of each age group living alone, 1986-2006**

<b>Age</b>	<b>1986</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>Per cent increase 1986-2006</b>
<b>20-29</b>	5.6	7.8	7.0	25.0
<b>30-39</b>	5.3	7.9	8.7	<b>64.2</b>
<b>40-49</b>	5.2	8.0	9.1	<b>75.0</b>
<b>50-59</b>	8.6	10.8	12.7	<b>47.7</b>
<b>60-69</b>	15.7	16.8	17.7	12.7
<b>70-79</b>	26.3	27.3	26.4	0.4
<b>80+</b>	28.0	34.0	35.6	27.1
<b>All</b>	9.3	11.9	13.0	40.0

Source: Customised data cubes of 1986,1996 and 2006 Census of Population and Housing

## Gender

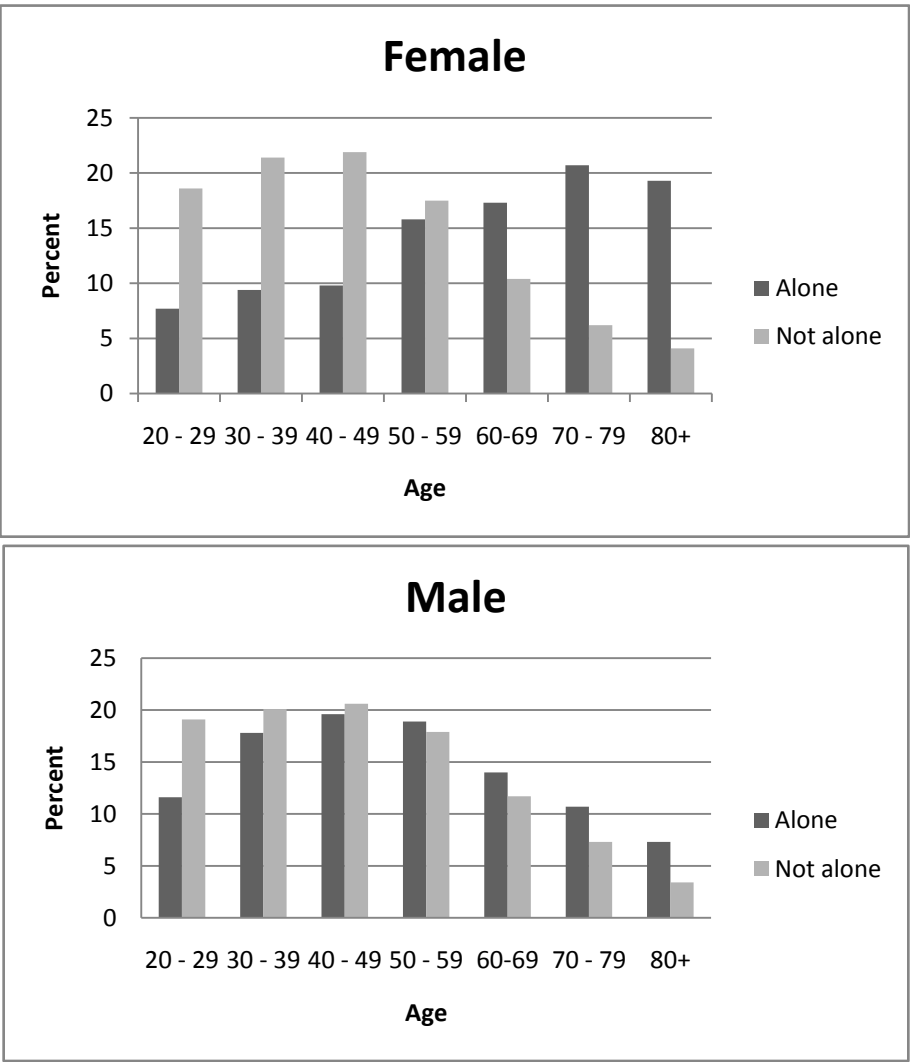
Overall women are more likely than men to live alone. In 2006, 14 per cent of adult women lived alone compared to 12 per cent of men. This meant that 55 per cent of those living alone were women, although this has fallen a little from 57 per cent in 1986.

While the proportion of men living alone is similar to that of women, the age profiles of men and women who live alone are quite different, as we see from Figure 1. Two patterns stand out.

The first is that women who live alone are concentrated in the older age groups – 50 and older – while men living alone are concentrated in the younger age groups, especially the ages 30–59. On average, women who live alone are considerably older than men who live alone. For example, of women who lived alone in 2006, 57 per cent were aged 60 or older compared with just 32 per cent of men.

The second pattern is that, relative to their share of the population aged 60 and over, older women are substantially over-represented among women who live alone. For example, in 2006, eight per cent of the adult female population was aged 70–79 but 21 per cent of women who lived alone were aged 70–79. By way of contrast, younger women are substantially under represented among women who live alone. For example, 20 per cent of adult women are aged in their thirties yet only nine per cent of women who lived alone were in their thirties. On the other hand, the age profile of men who live alone much more closely approximates the age profile of the adult male population as a whole (except for those in their twenties). Overall, living alone for people aged under 50 is substantially a male phenomenon while living alone from the age of 60 is largely a female living arrangement.

**Figure 1: Age profile of men and women who live alone compared to age profile of adult men and women those not living alone, 2006**



While the age profiles of men and women who lived alone were quite different in 2006, the differences were even greater in previous years. Indeed, the 2006 figures reflect a narrowing of the age differences of men and women living alone. For example, in 1986, 41 per cent of men who lived alone were young (aged under 40) while just 17 per cent of women living alone were this young. By 2006 this gap had narrowed so that the comparable figures were 29 per cent of men and 18 per cent of women. Over the 20-year period the age profile of men living alone has become older. This is not because young men had become less inclined to live alone but because men in their forties and fifties were becoming more likely to live alone than previously.

### **Marital status over time**

People who live alone divide into three sizeable marital status groups (Table 5). In 2006 the largest group of those living alone had never married (37 per cent in 2006); the next largest group were separated or divorced (32 per cent), followed by those who were widowed (28 per cent). (Table 5, bottom row).

The chance of living alone depends very much on a person's marital status. Widowed people are the most likely to live alone (56.5 per cent did so in 2006), followed by those who are divorced or separated (34 per cent in 2006), with the never married having the lowest rates of living alone (18.5 per cent in 2006).

In this section we argue that the increasing rates of living alone are linked to changes in marriage patterns: the increasing rates of living alone are at least partly because changes to marriage patterns have resulted in more people being 'at risk' of living alone. Married couples are unlikely to live alone and therefore have a low 'risk' of living alone. But single people, those who are divorced or separated and those who are widowed are all available to live alone. Changes in the rates of being single, divorced or widowed are therefore likely to affect the rates of living alone.

### **Never married**

More people were single in 2006 than in 1986. Over this period more young people were delaying marriage and an increasing percentage of older people had never married. We anticipate that these trends will mean that rates of living alone will increase among young people and that this will contribute to the increased rates of living alone.

In 1986, 19.6 per cent of people aged 20 and over had never married; by 2006 this had increased to 26.3 per cent. In 1986, 10.4 per cent of those in their thirties and forties had never married; by 2006 this had more than doubled to 24 per cent. While many young people live in a cohabiting relationship before marriage, these relationships are relatively unstable. Both the delay of marriage and the instability of cohabiting relationships among young people mean that more young people will live for a time without a partner and are therefore 'at risk' of living alone.

What is the evidence that these lower rates of marriage and delay in marriage contribute to the increased rate of living alone? At first sight Table 5 shows that people who have never married are *not* making up an increasing share of the living alone population – the percentage of people living alone who have never married has remained relatively stable since 1986. This is true for the population overall (Table 5, bottom row) and also for young people (Table 5, sub total row, age 20–39).

However, two observations suggest that the story is not so simple and that, in fact, the delays in marriage and lower rates of marriage *are* leading to increased levels of living alone. The first observation is that among those living alone there is almost a doubling of the per cent that are middle aged (age 40–59) and have never married. Second, young people made up a smaller share of the living alone population in 2006 than in 1986 (Table 3). Despite this, young people who had never married maintained their share of the living alone population over this period.

Table 5: Four age based groupings of living alone, 1986-2006

		1986					1996					2006				
		Never married	Divorced	Widowed	Married	Grand Total	Never married	Divorced	Widowed	Married	Grand Total	Never married	Divorced	Widowed	Married	Grand Total
20-39	Male	13.1	3.8	0.1	0.6	17.5	13.7	3.1	0.1	0.5	17.3	11.3	1.7	0.0	0.3	13.3
	Female sub total	7.7	1.9	0.1	0.2	10.0	9.0	1.7	0.2	0.3	11.2	8.1	1.0	0.1	0.1	9.3
		20.8	5.7	0.2	0.8	27.5	22.8	4.8	0.3	0.8	28.5	19.4	2.8	0.1	0.4	22.7
40-59	Male	4.9	5.8	0.6	0.8	12.1	5.4	7.9	0.5	0.7	14.4	7.9	8.6	0.4	0.6	17.5
	Female sub total	2.4	4.2	2.8	0.4	9.7	3.1	6.4	1.9	0.6	11.9	4.9	7.4	1.4	0.4	14.0
		7.2	10.0	3.5	1.2	21.2	8.5	14.2	2.4	1.3	26.4	12.8	16.0	1.7	1.0	31.5
60-79	Male	3.1	3.1	4.6	0.7	11.5	2.6	3.8	3.6	0.6	10.6	2.6	5.4	2.7	0.5	11.2
	Female sub total	2.9	3.6	22.6	1.0	30.1	1.8	4.3	16.7	0.6	23.5	1.7	6.6	12.1	0.5	20.8
		6.0	6.6	27.3	1.8	41.7	4.4	8.1	20.3	1.2	34.1	4.4	11.9	14.8	0.9	32.0
80+	Male	0.3	0.1	1.4	0.2	2.0	0.3	0.2	1.8	0.2	2.4	0.4	0.5	2.3	0.2	3.3
	Female sub total	0.7	0.2	5.9	0.3	7.0	0.6	0.3	7.6	0.2	8.6	0.5	0.7	9.2	0.2	10.6
		0.9	0.3	7.4	0.5	9.0	0.8	0.6	9.4	0.3	11.1	0.9	1.1	11.5	0.4	13.9
Total	Male	21.3	12.8	6.8	2.3	43.1	22.0	15.0	5.9	1.9	44.8	22.2	16.1	5.4	1.5	45.3
	Female	13.7	9.8	31.5	1.9	56.9	14.5	12.7	26.4	1.7	55.3	15.2	15.7	22.7	1.1	54.7
	Grand Total	35.0	22.6	38.3	4.2	100	36.5	27.7	32.3	3.6	100	37.4	31.8	28.1	2.7	100

Source: Customised data cubes of 1986,1996 and 2006 Census of Population and Housing

## Divorced and separated

The Family Law reforms in 1975 resulted in a rise in the divorce rate in Australia and a consequent rise in the proportion of the adult population that was divorced. We anticipate that this increase in divorce will mean that more young people and, particularly, more middle aged people, will live alone.

In 1976, just 5.5 per cent of adults were divorced or separated. By 1986, this had increased to 8.2 per cent and reached 12.2 per cent by 2006. The rates of cohabitation have also increased from 5.7 per cent of all couples in 1986 to 14.8<sup>10</sup> per cent in 2006. Since cohabiting relationships have much higher rates of separation than registered marriages,<sup>11</sup> the increasing rate of cohabitation and the increased percentage of the population that is divorced or separated means that more people will be 'at risk' of living alone.

But did the increased proportion of the population at risk of living alone actually lead to increased levels of living alone? Certainly, divorce and separation are linked to living alone – a third of separated and divorced adults live alone. The period 1986–2006 saw an increase in the proportion of the living alone population who were divorced or separated – it increased from 23 per cent in 1986 to 32 per cent in 2006 – a 41 per cent increase (Table 5, bottom row). This reflects the 49 per cent increase in the percentage of divorced people in the population over the same period. It seems clear, then, that an important component of the growth in lone living has been the increased number of divorced people in the population.

Increases in living alone attributable to increased levels of separation and divorce are particularly due to increases in divorce among middle aged people (aged 40–59), where the growth in divorced people living alone has been most pronounced. The 10 per cent of those who lived alone who were divorced and middle aged in 1986 had increased to 16 per cent by 2006. If divorced people in their sixties are included, the percentage of divorced middle aged people among the living alone population increased from 14.7 per cent in 1986 to 24.1 per cent in 2006.

## Widows

Popular explanations sometimes suggest that more people will live alone in later life because they are now living longer and this will mean extended periods of widowhood. But this is unlikely to be the case. Indeed, we argue that the increase in living alone in the population has occurred *despite* increased longevity. Since longevity is increasing for both men and women, it is more likely that increased longevity will delay the time at which people become widowed and thus delay the age at which older people begin to live alone.

Widowhood is becoming less common. In 1986, 23 per cent of people in their sixties and seventies were widowed; by 2006 this had declined to 15.1 per cent – a 34 per cent decrease. Among those aged 80 and over, the per cent of widows declined from 60.5 per cent to 53.7 per cent. Given the decline in the proportion of widows in the elderly population it is likely that widows will also make up a smaller share of the population who live alone.

This is certainly what the Census evidence shows. In 1986 widows made up 38 per cent of all people living alone but by 2006 widows only constituted 28 per cent of the living alone population – a 26 per cent reduction (Table 5, bottom row). Most of this decline of widows among those living alone is concentrated among those in their

sixties and seventies where widowed people dropped from 27 per cent in 1986 to 15 per cent in 2006. However, among those living alone when eighty or older there is an increase in the percentage of widows. This pattern is consistent with the idea ventured earlier that there is a decline in living alone among those in their sixties and seventies because widowhood is being delayed by increased longevity – especially of men.

In summary, the increase in living alone from 1986–2006 is linked to changes in marital status over this time. The single most important marital change in this respect is the increase in the proportion of divorced and separated adults, particularly in the 40–69 age range. The increased proportion of people who have never married also has contributed to the increase in living alone. The effect of these two changes in marriage patterns has been dampened by increased longevity and the decline in the number of widows and therefore in the number of elderly people available to live alone.

### **Social advantage and disadvantage**

Earlier, we foreshadowed our interest in examining the extent to which living alone is a living arrangement that reflects social advantage or social disadvantage. Since living alone is an expensive living arrangement and because it is so compatible with middle class values of independence, privacy and flexibility, it might be a growing phenomenon among the well off. We also noted that in much popular discourse, living alone is viewed as a sign of a failure to develop relationships and is the living arrangement of those without the social attributes (income, education, employment) to attract or keep a partner. We also use the relationship with socio-economic status to infer whether living alone is a choice among reasonable alternatives, or is imposed by circumstance. Generally, those with higher income and education have more choices in life. If those who live alone disproportionately have high income/high education, this suggests that the aloneness is preferred to the compromises that must be made in order to live with others. In this section we will examine the 2006 data and trends since 1986 to shed light on these questions.

### **Education**

The main story is that women living alone, especially younger women, are more highly educated than women in general and more highly educated than men who live alone. Middle aged men who live alone tend to have poorer education than middle aged men in general and less education than women in general and especially than women who live alone. In other words, women who live alone tend to be the educational winners and men who live alone tend to be the educational underachievers. This pattern has become more accentuated over the 20-year period from 1986–2006.

In 2006, young and middle aged women living alone were more highly educated than similarly aged women not living alone. For example, 40.2 per cent of women living alone in their twenties and thirties had at least a degree qualification compared with 27 per cent of women in their twenties and thirties who did not live alone. The opposite is true regarding low education (no post-school qualifications). Consistently in 1986, 1996 and 2006, young and middle aged women who lived alone were less likely than women not living alone in the comparable age group to have no post-school qualifications and more likely to have a degree.

The educational advantage of women who live alone contrasts with that of middle aged men who live alone. While younger men had educational levels typical of their age

group, middle aged men who lived alone, especially in 1996 and 2006, were at an educational disadvantage relative to all men their age. This disadvantage can be seen in the proportions that have no post school qualifications. For example, in 2006, 50 per cent of men living alone in their forties and fifties had no qualifications compared to 41.9 per cent of men not living alone (Table 6).

Women who live alone have higher educational levels than men who live alone – especially among those who are young or middle aged. For example, compared to men in 2006, 17 per cent more women who lived alone in their twenties or thirties had a university degree. Among men and women living alone in middle age there were nine per cent more women than men with a degree.

The educational gap between men and women living alone is widening. It is striking that the educational level of young women living alone has increased so sharply from 1986–2006. In 1986, just 17 per cent of young women living alone had a degree; by 2006, 40 percent had a degree – an increase of 23 percentage points. This is a much sharper level of increase than among young men who lived alone, where the comparable increase was from 14 to 23 per cent – just a nine percentage point increase. The same pattern occurs among middle aged men and women living alone. In 1986, seven per cent of women living alone had a degree; in 2006, 25 per cent had a degree (an 18 percentage point increase). For middle aged men living alone the increase in those holding a degree was from seven per cent to 17 per cent – a 10 percentage point increase.

We interpret the gender differences in the role that education plays in solo living in the following way. We know that there is a strong positive link between education and the amount that people can earn. That is, people who have more education typically have higher earnings and incomes. Women with higher education are more able to support themselves financially than are women with less education. They may also, as a result of their learning and success in the education system, be more confident about relying on their own resources in managing life. More educated women are thus in a better position to live independently, if they cannot find (or choose not to look for) a suitable partner. This capacity for independence makes it easier to be more fastidious. And women who are more fastidious are more likely not to find an acceptable partner, and hence to be single. The same story applies to the decision to leave a marriage. More educated, higher earning women find it less intimidating to contemplate leaving an unsatisfactory marriage.

We think the story for men is different. Traditionally, a major contribution that men bring to a partnership is income. The breadwinner role of the man in a marriage is still important for many people. Less educated men (especially those with no post-school qualifications) are finding it hard to earn a decent and steady wage. A major reason for this is the changes in the economy, which are resulting in a decline in the good blue collar jobs that were the mainstay for less educated men. Men with no post-school qualifications are increasingly less likely to be in the labour force and, if they are employed, more likely to be in casual and/or part-time jobs. This renders them less attractive marriage prospects and hence they are more likely to be solo than better educated men: it is harder for them to be good breadwinners and thereby to attract and keep a mate.

On this interpretation, women of working age who live alone are likely to be doing so from choice. But men of working age who live alone do so because they find it harder to find a partner (and are unlikely to have custody of any children if they have them).

**Table 6: Education profile of people living alone by age and gender compared to those not living alone by age/gender group, 1986-2006**

	1986				1996				2006			
	Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
	Alone	Not alone	Alone	Not alone	Alone	Not alone	Alone	Not alone	Alone	Not alone	Alone	Not alone
	<b>20-39</b>											
Degree or higher	13.9	9.8	16.9	7.0	16.6	14.5	27.0	16.4	22.9	21.4	40.2	27.2
Diploma/Certificate	33.0	35.7	29.5	23.47	30.9	32.7	21.6	19.6	32.2	32.8	23.5	22.9
No qualifications	53.1	54.5	53.6	69.6	52.4	52.8	51.5	63.9	44.9	45.8	36.3	49.9
	<b>40-59</b>											
Degree or higher	7.0	7.4	6.5	3.3	13.6	15.4	17.2	12.2	16.5	20.6	25.4	20.4
Diploma/Certificate	30.7	36.0	21.2	18.0	30.4	34.8	17.3	17.0	33.5	37.6	21.3	20.6
No qualifications	62.3	56.7	72.3	78.7	56.0	49.9	65.6	70.8	50.0	41.9	53.3	59.0
	<b>60+</b>											
Degree or higher	3.1	3.8	1.3	1.1	5.6	7.1	3.9	3.4	9.4	11.6	8.9	8.5
Diploma/Certificate	25	27.5	11.6	11.3	24.3	26.6	7.7	8.7	31.8	33.63	10.9	11.7
No qualifications	71.9	68.7	87	87.6	70.1	66.3	88.4	87.8	58.9	54.8	80.3	79.8

Source: Customised data cubes of 1986,1996 and 2006 Census of Population and Housing

## Income

The interpretation we have just given can be tested partly by looking at the relative incomes of men and women who live alone.

Because of difficulties in comparing the income data over time, our observations are restricted to patterns in 2006. It is difficult to compare directly the *individual* income of people who live alone with that of people in multi-person households. Many individuals in multi-person family households will have no income or a modest income because they are in the part-time labour force or not in the labour force at all (eg, many mothers and adult children). It is also difficult to compare the *household* income of people in lone person and multi-person households. Since a multi-person household potentially has multiple income earners it would hardly be surprising to find that multi-person households had higher average incomes than lone person households.

The normal solution to this problem is to examine the *equivalised household income* of households. The Census variable, Household Equivalised Weekly Income, is used for this purpose. Using this variable the equivalised income for a lone person household is the same as the household income. For households with two or more members 'it is an indicator of the household income that would be needed by a lone person to enjoy the same level of economic well being'.<sup>12</sup> In the analysis that follows, equivalised household income is categorised into five groups which are as close as possible to income quintiles.<sup>13</sup> The lowest income quintile represents the 20 per cent of households in the lowest income group: they have an equivalised weekly household income between minus \$171 to \$315. The highest income group reflects the equivalised income of the highest income earning households (22 per cent of all households). These households had an equivalised weekly household income of \$1077 or more.

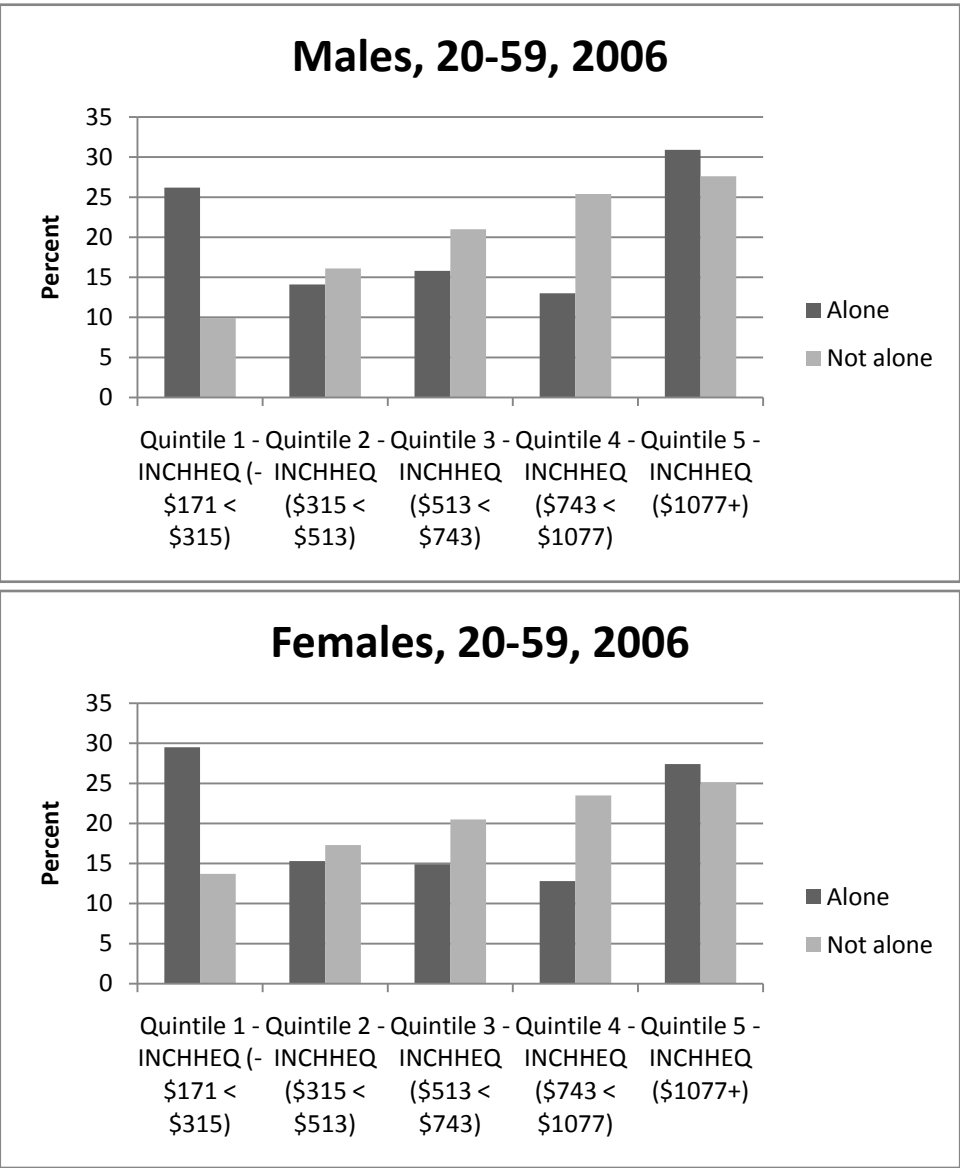
The evidence indicates a clustering of those who live alone into a large group with low income and another group with high income. This polarisation among those who live alone is found especially among those aged 20–59 and is clearly evident among both men and women.

Do men and women who live alone have higher or lower equivalised household income than those who do not live alone? Figure 2 shows that the income poor are substantially over-represented among men and women who live alone. Among men aged under 60<sup>14</sup> who live alone, 26 per cent are in the lowest income group compared to just 10 per cent of men under 60 who do not live alone. Similarly, twice as many women who live alone are in the lowest income group than are all women in this age group (30 per cent compared with 14 per cent).

The same graphs also show a higher propensity to live alone among those with the highest incomes, for both men and women.

A closer look at the income of men and women who live alone that focuses on different age groups tells us a little more about the relative advantage and disadvantage of those who live alone. Table 7 shows that women living alone in their thirties and forties are especially likely to be high income earners. Of women who live alone in their thirties, 42 per cent are in the highest income group<sup>15</sup> (compared to 24 per cent of women in their thirties not living alone) and 32 per cent of women living alone in their forties are in the highest income group. While men in the same age group who live alone are also over-represented in the highest income group, the pattern for women is

**Figure 2: Household equivalised weekly income (income quintiles) for adult men and women aged 20-59, living alone compared with adults not living alone, 2006**



more pronounced. In contrast, the image of poor older singles is strongly supported by the data. Two thirds of men and three quarters of women who are over 60 and live alone have incomes in the lowest income group – a much higher proportion than others of the same age.

**Table 7: Income distribution of men and women living alone compared with those not living alone by age group, 2006**

Age	Lowest Quintile		Highest Quintile	
	Alone	Not alone	Alone	Not alone
<b>MALE</b>				
<b>20-29</b>	23.4	9.9	25.2	26.8
<b>30-39</b>	19.3	9.2	<b>36.8</b>	28.1
<b>40-49</b>	26.0	10.5	<b>32.8</b>	24.8
<b>50-59</b>	34.7	9.9	26.9	31.0
<b>60+</b>	63.9	30.2	9.2	12.3
<b>FEMALE</b>				
<b>20-29</b>	26.4	13.2	19.5	25.7
<b>30-39</b>	16.6	15.1	<b>41.6</b>	24.3
<b>40-49</b>	27.5	13.5	<b>31.5</b>	23.2
<b>50-59</b>	40.1	12.5	20.2	28.1
<b>60+</b>	74.0	31.0	5.0	10.2

Source: Customised data cubes of 2006 Census of Population and Housing

## Occupation

Income is related to both education and occupation. Therefore it will not be surprising if living alone is linked to the occupation of men and women. But since income can be derived from many sources, especially for those not in the labour force, the occupational profile of those who live alone need not duplicate that which we have seen in relation to income.

Table 8 shows the occupational profile of employed men and women who live alone in their twenties and of those who live alone when aged 30–64.<sup>16</sup>

For both age groups the occupational profile of all employed men and women living alone is compared to that of their age group who are employed and do not live alone.

In many respects the occupational profile of those living alone is similar to that of those not living alone (within the same age and gender group). There are, however, noteworthy and important exceptions.

- Employed men who live alone after the age of 30 have a less advantaged occupational profile than men in this age group who do not live alone. Those men living alone are under-represented among managers (14 per cent compared with 20 per cent) and over-represented among machine operators, drivers and labourers (27 per cent compared with 22 per cent).
- Regardless of their age, employed women who live alone have a better occupational profile than employed women who do not live alone. Those women living alone are more likely to be professionals than employed women not living alone and less likely to work in clerical or sales jobs.

These data reinforce the emerging picture of women who live alone as being better educated professionals than women not living alone. On the other hand, men living

alone tend to have less education and jobs of lower standing than other employed men.

But these data are restricted to employed men and women. By excluding those who are out of the workforce, these figures may underestimate the relatively poor labour force position of men who live alone.

**Table 8: Occupational profile of employed men and women who live alone by age group (contrasted with similarly aged employed men and women not living alone), 2006**

	Male		Female	
	Lives alone	All	Lives alone	All
20 - 29				
Managers	9.8	8.0	9.0	7.2
Professionals	20.9	15.6	32.5	23.2
Technicians and Trades	26.5	28.5	5.7	5.7
Community and Personal Service	6.2	7.0	13.9	16.2
Clerical, admin, sales	14.2	16.7	33.4	41.0
Mach operators, drivers and labourers	22.3	24.3	5.5	6.7
Total	100	100	100	100
30-64				
Managers	13.9	19.8	11.5	11.2
Professionals	19.2	19.2	30.8	24.5
Technicians and Trades	21.5	21.8	4.2	4.4
Community and Personal Service	5.2	4.5	11.6	12.2
Clerical, admin, sales	13.0	12.4	33.1	36.8
Mach operators, drivers and labourers	27.2	22.4	8.9	11.0
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: Customised data cubes of 2006 Census of Population and Housing

### **Labour force participation**

The evidence so far is that age, gender, marital status and resources are linked with whether or not people live alone. In this section we investigate further the question of the extent to which those who live alone are part of the mainstream or whether they are more marginalised. Labour force participation is fundamental to participation in mainstream society for those of working age, especially for those who are single, and being outside the labour force brings with it many forms of marginalisation (financial,

social etc). We compare the workforce participation of those who live alone with that of people in the relevant age and gender group who do not live alone.

Table 9 reports employment levels of men and women separately for two age groups; those aged 20–39 and those aged 40–59. This separation into two age groups shows very different patterns in the older and younger age groups. Of particular relevance here is that in the 20–39 age group, the employment profile of men who lived alone was very similar to that of men in the same age group who did not live alone. However, among men aged 40–59, those living alone have very different employment patterns to other similarly aged men. Those living alone are much less likely to be employed full time and considerably more likely to be either unemployed or not in the labour force at all. While this pattern holds for all three periods reported in Table 9, the 2006 figures illustrate the point. Of men aged 40–59, only 57 per cent of those living alone were employed full time compared to 70 per cent of other men this age. The unemployment rate of those living alone was over double that for those not living alone (5.8 per cent compared with 2.8 per cent) and far more of those living alone were not in the workforce than was true for those in this age group not living alone (23 per cent compared with 13 per cent).

In both age groups, women living alone have much higher employment than women who do not live alone. Women who lived alone were far more likely than women not living alone to be in the labour force and to be employed full time. However, this is most likely to reflect the greater family responsibilities of women who do not live alone. Nevertheless, women who live alone exhibit an interesting employment characteristic. Women living alone have poorer employment profiles than men living alone. Among the younger age group (20–39) this is limited to higher rates of part-time work among women living alone but for the older age group the poorer employment profile of women living alone is evident in most employment categories. These women are less likely to have full-time employment than their male counterparts, have higher levels of part-time employment and are more likely to be out of the labour force altogether. The reason for this is not entirely clear, but is likely to be a cohort effect. That is, women of this generation often grew up not expecting to be fully engaged in paid work and many of the now-single are likely to have been married at some stage and to have worked part time, if at all. It is hard for women with such a history, later in life, to find adequate paid work.

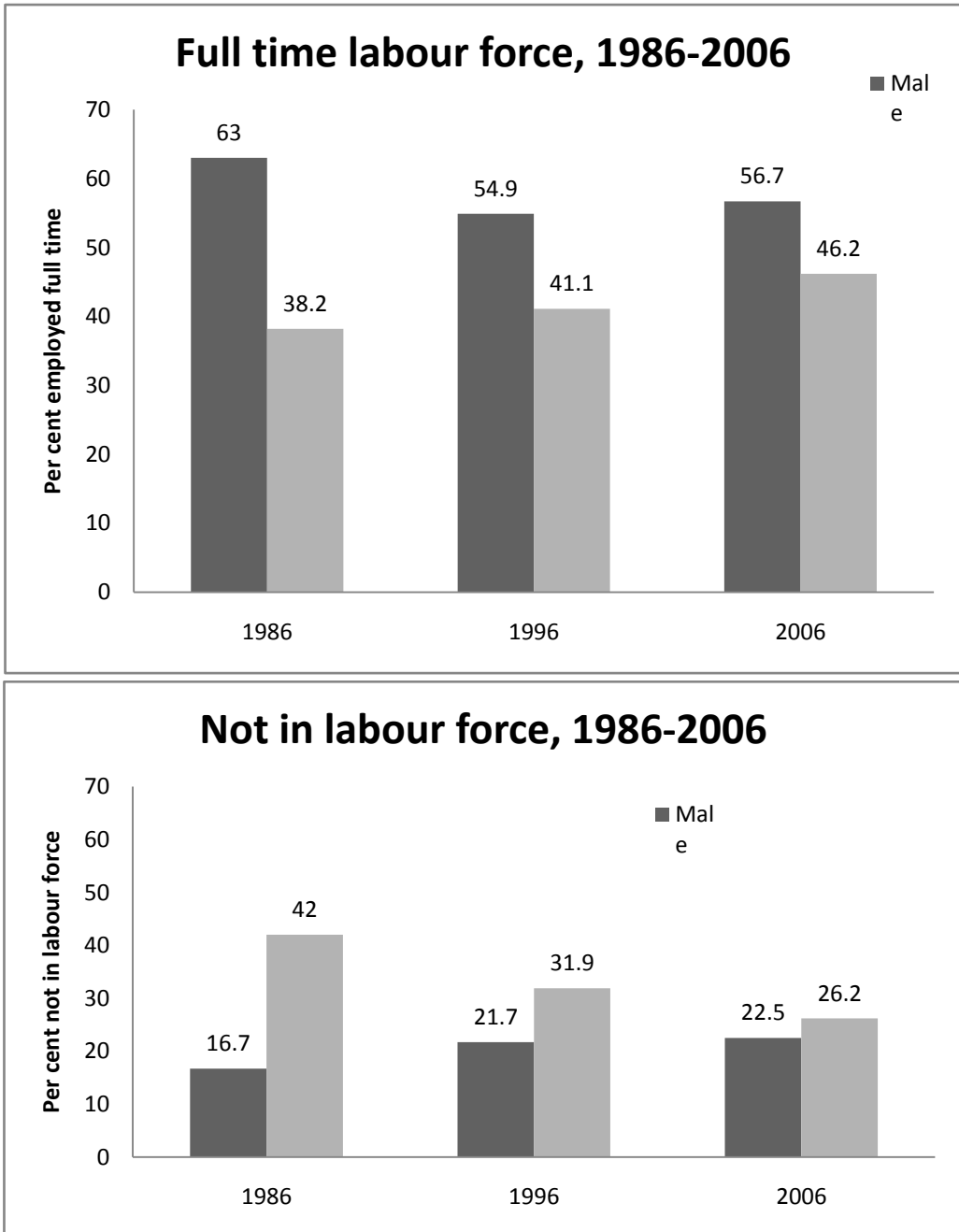
What is clear though is that this gap in the employment profiles of men and women living alone is narrowing (Figure 3). For example, in 1986, 63 per cent of men aged 40–59 who were living alone worked full time compared to just 38 per cent of such women – a gap of 25 percentage points. By 2006 this had narrowed to just 12 percentage points. In 1986, 17 per cent of middle aged men who lived alone were not in the labour force compared to 42 per cent of similar women who lived alone – a gap of 26 percentage points. By 2006 the gap had narrowed to just four percentage points.

**Table 9: Labour force participation of those living alone by gender and age contrasted with people not living alone by age/gender groups, 1986-2006**

	1986				1996				2006			
	Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
	Alone	Not alone	Alone	Not alone	Alone	Not alone	Alone	Not alone	Alone	Not alone	Alone	Not alone
<b>20-39</b>												
<b>Employed full time</b>	74.6	76.2	71.1	35.3	64.9	66.9	59.7	34.9	68.7	66.6	65.9	35.9
<b>Employed part time</b>	7.7	6.4	12.9	19.5	11.0	10.4	17.3	25.2	11.1	12.7	15.8	28.1
<b>Unemployed, looking for work</b>	9.4	8.9	7.2	6.4	11.7	9.4	8.2	6.1	5.7	4.9	3.8	4.2
<b>Not in the labour force</b>	5.0	6.4	6.3	36.2	10.6	9.9	13.2	20.9	11.0	10.6	10.9	27.0
<b>Other</b>	3.3	2.2	2.6	2.7	1.8	3.53	1.6	2.9	3.5	5.2	3.5	4.7
<b>40-59</b>												
<b>Employed full time</b>	63.0	75.9	38.2	26.7	54.9	69.1	41.1	31.9	56.7	69.9	46.2	34.4
<b>Employed part time</b>	7.3	5.9	12.0	20.2	10.1	8.5	18.0	26.8	11.6	9.9	20.3	32.0
<b>Unemployed, looking for work</b>	9.2	5.2	4.7	3.0	11.1	6.1	6.8	3.7	5.8	2.8	3.7	2.7
<b>Not in the labour force</b>	16.7	11.1	42.0	47.8	21.7	13.4	31.9	34.6	22.5	12.6	26.2	27.0
<b>Other</b>	3.9	1.9	3.1	2.3	2.3	2.9	2.2	3.0	3.4	4.7	3.6	3.8

Source: Customised data cubes of 1986, 1996 and 2006 Census of Population and Housing

**Figure 3: Labour force participation of men and women aged 40-59 who lived alone, 1986-2006**



## **Conclusions**

People who live alone are a large, growing and diverse group that resists simple characterisation. Men and women who live alone are drawn from all age groups, have a variety of marital histories and come from across the social spectrum. These factors, gender, age, marital status, education, income, occupation and labour force status all work together in different ways so that there is no simple way of describing those who live alone. Furthermore, simple descriptions of the living alone population are made more difficult by the fact that its demographic shape is changing.

Australia's levels of lone living are similar to other developed English speaking nations but lower than the majority of developed countries. More than a quarter of all households are lone person households and 13 per cent of adults lived alone in 2006. Along with most other countries, the extent of lone living continues to increase.

Substantial numbers of people in all adult age groups live alone: living alone is by no means a living arrangement just of the elderly. In 2006 approximately a third of those living alone were younger than 50; about a third were in their fifties and sixties; and just under a third were seventy or older. Nor is living alone predominantly caused by death of a spouse. Indeed, those living alone are most likely to have never married; they are next most likely to be divorced and least likely to be widowed.

The age and marital status of those who live alone has changed over the twenty years from 1986 to 2006. The relative size of the younger age group (20–39) has declined; the middle aged group (40–69) has increased; and the relative size of the elderly group (70 plus) has remained fairly stable.

Part of the reason for the growth of those in their forties, fifties and eighties in the lone living population is that in the population as a whole in these age groups has grown because of patterns of fertility and increased longevity. Similarly, those in their twenties make up a smaller share of the living alone population because this age group is shrinking in the population.

But the changing age structure of the population only partly explains the changing age profile of those living alone. The growth of middle aged people in the living alone population is partly because of the increase in divorce that has taken place since 1976. Not only has the number of divorced people grown in the population but the rate at which they live alone has also grown steadily since 1986. The growth in divorced people in the middle aged living alone population is amplified by the fact that at this age many lone mothers begin to live alone as their children leave home.

The proportion of the living alone population consisting of divorced people has also grown relatively because widows are becoming a less important part of this population. Because of greater longevity, women are becoming widows later in life, which also means that the available pool of widows 'at risk' of living alone has shrunk. The ageing of the population and of widows in particular (in 1986, 24 per cent of widows were aged over 80 while in 2006, 42 per cent of widows were aged over 80) has contributed to the growth of lone living among the 80 plus age group and the decline in living alone among those in their sixties and seventies. But the changing age profile of widows is not the only reason for the increase in living alone among the 80 plus age group. Improved health and better community care has led to sharply reduced levels of institutional care as elderly people are better able to remain living alone in their own homes.

While the living alone population consists of roughly similar percentages of women and men (55 per cent and 45 per cent respectively), living alone is a highly gendered phenomenon. The types of women who live alone are quite distinct from the men who live alone.

These gender differences show up in a variety of ways. Women who live alone are typically older and consequently younger people living alone are far more likely to be men than women. In contrast, among the 60 plus age group, there is a heavy preponderance of women – largely because the greater longevity of women means that many outlive their husbands. In contrast, men living alone are more likely to be young and to have never married or are middle aged and divorced.

But things are changing. While the rate of living alone is higher for women, the gap is closing – the rate of men living alone is growing more quickly than for women. The difference in the age profiles of men and women living alone is also narrowing. While men living alone are still younger than women living alone, the differences are less in 2006 than in 1986 – primarily because young men are not living alone at the same rate as they were previously.

The gendered nature of living alone is not restricted to age and marital status. It is also reflected in the relative social advantage and disadvantage of those who live alone. Although the picture is somewhat complex depending on the age group under consideration, the general picture is that men who live alone in middle age are considerably more socially disadvantaged than other men and more disadvantaged than women who live alone. In contrast, many of the women who live alone are socially more advantaged than women in general. But even these generalisations must be taken with care since there is clear evidence of social polarisation within the population that lives alone – among both men and women there is a clustering of those who are quite disadvantaged and a clustering of relatively advantaged people.

To be more specific, women who live alone have higher levels of education than men living alone, especially among those younger than 50. This gender gap is much greater than for the under 50s population at large. Reinforcing the disadvantaged position of middle aged men living alone, we note that their education levels are also much lower than those of middle aged men in general.

The education gap between men and women living alone has widened since 1986. While the education levels of the population have increased considerably since 1986, the education level of women living alone has increased at a considerably faster rate than that of men who live alone and of women in general. The result of this is that increasingly women who live alone stand out as being more educated than both men and other women, especially those women under age 50.

On the other hand, men who live alone are increasingly relatively poorly educated both in relation to other men and to women who live alone, particularly if they are middle aged.

The education story is reinforced by the picture of occupation. In all age groups, employed women who live alone are more likely to be in professional occupations than other employed women, all men, and men living alone.

In contrast, men living alone are less likely than other men to be in management positions and middle aged men living alone are more likely than other men to have labouring jobs.

The gendered nature of the employment of men and women living alone is clear when considering workforce participation. Middle aged men living alone have lower rates of full-time labour force participation and are more likely than middle aged men in general to be out of the labour force or unemployed. Women living alone, however, have much higher rates of full-time workforce participation than women in general – no doubt because women not living alone will have more limited workforce attachment due to family responsibilities.

The income picture is more complex than is suggested by employment and education. Rather than finding that solo women are doing well financially while solo men are doing poorly, we find strong evidence of income polarisation among both men and women who lived alone in their thirties, forties and fifties. Working age men and women living alone tended to be clustered in either the lowest or the highest income groups.

In summary, living alone continues to be a popular and growing living arrangement. The living alone population is diverse and changing. Its character changes as the characteristics of the wider population changes. Thus the rise in divorce, the baby boomer population, better health, improved education and the changing opportunities for women have altered the profile of the living alone population over at least the last twenty years. The living alone population is highly gendered. Relative to men living alone, women who live alone are older, better educated, more likely to be in the workforce and employed full time, own their own home and to be employed in professional occupations. On the other hand, men living alone have lower incomes, are more likely to be divorced and middle aged or young, have no post-school education and rent rather than own their own home. Middle aged men in particular who lived alone were in a relatively disadvantaged position. This is in marked contrast to the middle aged women who live alone, who were advantaged on many dimensions.

Is living alone being driven by population aging? Not really. The baby boomer cohort and increased divorce are more important than population ageing. By delaying widowhood, greater longevity has reduced living alone among older people. To the extent that living alone has increased among the elderly (80+) this is due to better health and improved community care rather than to population ageing.

Is living alone a reflection of increasing affluence? Partly. Living alone in general, and divorce in particular, is expensive. As the general standard of living rises, it becomes more possible for people to divorce, to live alone as younger singles and to live separately from their children, or other family, as widows.

Is living alone a reflection of marginalisation and disadvantage? Partly. Among men, especially middle aged men, living alone is associated with lower education, poorer labour force attachment, divorce, low income and living in rental accommodation.



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- <sup>1</sup> de Vaus, D (2004). *Diversity and Change in Australian Families*. Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Any private dwelling in which there is only one usual resident at least 15 years of age, is classified as being a lone person household', Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2006). *Census Dictionary 2006 (reissue)*. Catalogue No 2901.0, ABS, Canberra.
- <sup>3</sup> Furedi, F (2002). *Singleton society*. <http://www.spiked-online.com/articles/00000002D3A7.htm>. Accessed: 20 September 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> Hall, R, Ogden, P and Hall, C (1999). 'Living alone: evidence from England and Wales and France for the last two decades' in McRae, S *Changing Britain: Families and Households in the 1990s*. Oxford University Press, Oxford: 265-296.
- <sup>5</sup> Less than two percent of 15–19 year olds live alone and only four per cent of 19 year olds live alone.
- <sup>6</sup> Non-private dwellings include hotels, motels, boarding houses, private hotels, public hospitals, nursing hostels and homes for the aged, child care institutions, defence force communal facilities and halls of residence. Accommodation for the aged that is not self contained, which is accommodation where meals are provided, are regarded as non-private dwellings. Self contained facilities in retirement villages are regarded as private dwellings. ABS (2006) *op cit*.
- <sup>7</sup> Throughout this paper adult refers to people aged 20 and older.

- <sup>8</sup> Over the comparable period (1986–2006) lone person households grew by 36 per cent.
- <sup>9</sup> Within the 80+ age group this does not hold. After a point within this age group (over 90), the probability of living alone begins to decline as health declines and institutionalisation rates increase.
- <sup>10</sup> 2006 Census table 20680: Social Marital Status by Age by Sex downloaded from [http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3310114.nsf/home/census+data?opendocument?utm\\_id=LN](http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3310114.nsf/home/census+data?opendocument?utm_id=LN). Accessed: 4 April 2009.
- <sup>11</sup> de Vaus (2004) *op cit*: 123.
- <sup>12</sup> ABS (2006) *op cit*: 65.
- <sup>13</sup> Since income was collected as grouped data it was not possible to group data exactly into precise income quintiles.
- <sup>14</sup> Those aged over 60 were excluded from this analysis because the high proportion of pensioners over the age of 60 was likely to distort the income patterns of those of working age.
- <sup>15</sup> The income groups are based on the income distribution of all Australians with an income. When the term 'highest' or 'lowest' income group is used this refers to the top 20 per cent and bottom 20 per cent of income earners in Australia – not just of men and not just of women in a specific age group.
- <sup>16</sup> This division of age groups was used because it allowed for some of the patterns to be seen more clearly. The occupational patterns of those in their twenties were somewhat different from those who are 30 and older. Including those in their twenties with others masked some of the important occupational patterns.

